

Afghan Refugees in Pakistan

November 1986

Background: Refugees began to flee Afghanistan in the summer of 1978, soon after the Marxist regime came to power in a bloody coup. Widespread political repression and religious persecution caused thousands of Afghans to abandon their homeland. The Soviet invasion in December 1979 increased the flow of refugees to a flood. Pakistan, which borders Afghanistan, became the principal country of first asylum.

Current situation: Today, the Government of Pakistan estimates that it hosts 2.8 million Afghans, the largest refugee population in the world. The registered Afghan refugees are located in some 300 camps, about 75% in the North West Frontier Province, 20% in Baluchistan, and 4% in the Punjab. Refugees continue to arrive, although at a lower rate than in earlier years.

Despite considerable economic and political costs, the Government and people of Pakistan have extended an impressive welcome to the Afghans. The refugees are subject to few restrictions and, for the most part, are allowed to travel freely, hold jobs, and establish businesses. The Government of Pakistan estimates that it bears nearly half the cost of the relief effort, chiefly expenditures for administration of the program and transportation of relief commodities.

In addition to the financial burden of caring for the Afghans, the Pakistanis have absorbed costs far more difficult to calculate. Pakistan's inland transportation system moves several hundred thousand tons of relief materials each year. Land prices have risen as a result of the refugees' presence and, in an economy already experiencing high unemployment, Afghans often compete with Pakistanis for scarce jobs. Pakistan's natural resources have been hard hit; the refugees and their livestock have strained scarce water supplies and stripped forestlands.

Tension between refugees and Pakistanis is inevitable. Fortunately there have been few violent incidents, largely because of the strong cultural and political ties between the indigenous population and the refugees. Since early 1986, however, there has been a marked increase in Soviet-backed attempts to exploit Pakistani concern over the refugees' presence through sabotage efforts and cross-border penetrations of Pakistani airspace and territory. These incidents, which have taken the lives of both Pakistanis and Afghans, can be traced to agents of the Kabul regime.

Although the Afghan Government has officially offered amnesty to those returning home, conditions inside Afghanistan are such that the refugees have largely ignored the offer; most prefer to wait in Pakistan until a political solution permits their return.

UN responsibilities: The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) coordinates the overall international assistance effort and monitors

programs implemented by the Government of Pakistan and other international and private voluntary organizations. The UNHCR program is multifaceted, comprising major activities in the areas of health, education, water supply, and veterinary care, as well as the procurement and distribution of relief supplies. The UNHCR's budget for Afghan relief and assistance in 1987 is about \$52 million.

World Food Program efforts: The World Food Program (WFP), working closely with the UNHCR, is responsible for projecting the basic food needs of the refugees and organizing the supply of commodities from donor nations. The WFP also monitors the delivery and distribution of food donations to the camps. WFP food contribution targets for 1987 are 400,000 tons of wheat, 21,000 tons of vegetable oil, and 14,000 tons of sugar.

International and voluntary agencies: More than 40 international and private voluntary agencies are involved in furnishing relief supplies and providing health care, education, and vocational training for the refugees. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) manages mobile first aid facilities and two surgical hospitals to treat Afghans wounded in the war in their homeland. US Government-funded American organizations participating in the relief effort include the International Rescue Committee, Catholic Relief Services, Church World Service, Salvation Army, Americares Foundation, and Save the Children Federation.

Promoting refugee self-reliance: In keeping with Government of Pakistan policy, many of these organizations have expanded their programming to include projects that address the longer-term needs of the refugees, who have no immediate prospect for voluntary repatriation. Greater emphasis is now placed on promoting refugee self-reliance through programs that provide general education, vocational training, and follow-on employment opportunities. Special efforts are being made to provide female refugees with income-generating skills compatible with local customs. The World Bank, in conjunction with the UNHCR, has launched a series of afforestation, irrigation, and roadbuilding projects designed to employ refugee and local labor in repairing the environmental damage caused by the Afghans' presence.

US contribution: Since 1980, the US Government has committed about \$484 million in humanitarian assistance for Afghan refugee relief. The US has provided \$160 million to the UNHCR, and is now contributing about 30% of the UNHCR's annual program budget. More than \$286 million of the total US Government contribution has been in the form of PL-480 food commodities, more than 40% of the entire international community's food donations. In fiscal year 1987, the US will contribute 160,000 tons of wheat to the WFP's Pakistan program. Since 1980, the US Government also has donated more than \$10 million to the ICRC, \$6 million to the League of International Red Cross Societies, and nearly \$10.5 million to the above-mentioned US voluntary agencies. The US Government places a high priority on addressing refugee requirements in Pakistan. We will continue to monitor the situation closely and respond as needs warrant.